Get clients closer to their favourite creatures with theme park animal encounters, says Katie McGonagle

We’re said to be a nation of animal lovers, and judging by the number of adorable pet pictures flooding Facebook and Twitter, interest in our furriest friends is at its peak.

Channelling that ‘aww’ factor into actual bookings has never been easier, with the variety of up-close animal encounters on offer at theme parks and attractions across the world.

Fancy petting a penguin, feeding ferocious big cats, or becoming a zookeeper for a day? No problem. Animal attractions offer just as much of a thrill as hurtling down rollercoaster rides – and the extra commission from booking these VIP or behind-the-scenes experiences will top up your earnings too.

**DOMESTIC ANIMALS**

They might not be native, but the array of exotic animals in the UK means clients don’t always need to travel far to indulge their interests.

Chief among them is *Chessington World of Adventures*, which last year opened Zufari: Ride into Africa, a safari-style adventure in the midst of southwest London, with the chance to see rhino, giraffe and zebra on-site, plus daily sealion shows, feeding presentations, and a host of exotic species including meerkats, binturongs and coatis.

‘Xtra Adventures’ are also bookable on-site for the most dedicated animal lovers, including an off-road Giraffe Safari plus feeding time (£40) or a chance for over-16s to become zookeeper for the day (£175).

Keen conservationists can delve even deeper at *Paradise Wildlife Park*, an interactive zoo in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, where they can not only see white lions, white tiger, penguins and gibbons, but go behind the scenes for a better understanding of the animals.

Choose from a Tiger Tea, which includes a tour of the Big Cat Territory plus a presentation on
the park’s overseas conservation work, or to the chance to Feed the Big Cats, with strict supervision from the animals’ handlers. If visitors want their experience less ferocious and more friendly, Meet the Meerkats is a chance to get up close to these curious creatures – although staff warn that the meerkats might treat them as a human climbing frame. Adding a treat to a domestic break will help turn a simple holiday into a full-blown holiday. ZSL London Zoo is easily accessible on a short city break; Attraction World offers entry from £24 or £22 for under-15s, or as part of The London Pass covering up to 60 of the capital’s attractions (one day from £49 or £22 for under-15s, or entry to the Cornish Seal Sanctuary in Gweek.

**CREATURE CAPITAL**

Orlando doesn’t boast quite the same diversity as a Costa Rican rainforest or an African savannah, but its many theme parks are like a veritable who’s who of the animal world. Disney’s Animal Kingdom is a prime example: it has an incredible 1,500 animals from 250 different species (plus 3,000 species of plants). If visitors aren’t satisfied with exploring its botanical gardens to see giraffes, giant anteater and several colourful bird species, or feeling inspired by interactive conservation centre Rafiki’s Planet Watch, suspect one of several premium supplements of $65 for adults or $32.50 per child under nine), or the Wanyama Safari, a chance to spot free-roaming herds of giraffe, zebra and antelope; Lazy Landing for an avian extravaganza of lorikeets, hornbills and penguins; and an interactive Animal Care Centre offering budding vets a view of X-rays, surgeries and other treatments. A three-hour ticket with Do Something Different, offering 14 days’ unlimited entry to SeaWorld Orlando, Aquatica and Busch Gardens, Tampa, costs from £90 per adult and £45 per child. Sister park Discovery Cove takes to the water for SeaVenture, an underwater safari to see rays, sharks and schools of tropical fish (from £44 in addition to park entry). SeaWorld Orlando’s VIP Behind-the-Scenes tour allows guests to take a 90-minute guided walk to see rescued manatees, interact with a small shark, explore a hidden polar bear den and get within touching distance of a penguin (£29 per adult, £14 per child, both with Do Something Different). Offering the ultimate interactive experience, water babies can Swim with Dolphins at Dolphin Lagoon (Disco Cove Ultimate ticket including dolphin swim starts at £201 from Attraction World), or dine on a wetsuit for the VIP Beluga Interaction (from £115).

**SMALLER SPECIES**

There are all kinds of other creatures lurking in Florida waters, some friendlier than others, many of which are on display at the state’s smallest attractions. One glimpse of a gentle manatee will melt even the most hard-hearted holidaymaker, so Do Something Different’s full-day Florida Adventure Tour – Swim with Manatees is bound to be a hit. Taking place in the wilds of the Crystal River on Florida’s Nature Coast, the excursion includes transport from Orlando, snorkelling equipment, breakfast and lunch, admission to Homosassa State Wildlife Park, and an airboat adventure on the Homosassa River, from £74 per adult. Equally iconic in Florida – albeit with rather sharper teeth – the alligator is best viewed at Gatorland, which has a Trainer for a Day experience that moves from seeing baby alligators in the morning to full-size ones in the afternoon, and hands-on sessions with other reptiles at the Upclose Encounters Show (from £125, minimum age 12).

Alternatively, get out to the alligators’ “home territory” with a nighttime airboat tour through the swamp with Boggy Creek Airboat Rides (£17.95 adult, £47.95 under-10s), or take your life – and a small reptile – in your own hands with Attraction World’s offer to get a free photo with a small.

**FAST FACT**

Disney’s Dine with Animal Specialists lunch includes a speciality pineapple and wild mushroom soup, a choice of main course and dessert, with a small group expert-led adventure through untracked areas of the parks either on foot or in customised safari vehicles (eight and over, from £189). Recreate the real African experience with a Sunrise Safari before breakfast (open to Kilimanjaro Club Level guests at the Animal Kingdom Lodge, for a supplement of £65 for adults or £32.50 per child under nine), or the Wanyama Safari, an afternoon game drive followed by a feast of South African flavours. Swapping snorkeY for seawater, Disney’s Dolphins in Interaction in waist-deep water, includes a half-hour dolphin experience, water babies can Swim with Dolphins at Dolphin Lagoon (Discovery Cove ultimate ticket including dolphin swim starts at £201 from Attraction World), or dine on a wetsuit for the VIP Beluga Interaction (from £115).
alligator on its new half-day adventure ticket to Wild Florida Wildlife Park (£12 adult, £10 under-12s).

Meanwhile, metropolitan Miami boasts a different kind of close encounter. Jungle Island is home to all manner of exotic animals including kangaroos, lemurs, alabdro tortoises and a cassowary, best seen on a VIP Safari (£199 with Attraction World, with 90-minute private guided tour, lunch and time with a trainer), or with an additional encounter such as the Lemur Experience (£65 adult, £62 under-10s, including park entry) for a 45-minute session with the rare Madagascan primates.

**TOP TIP** Universal Cabana Bay Beach Resort is giving away beach bags or combo packs travelweekly.co.uk/competitions from 14 island resorts. It’s all about the aquarium at Atlantis The Palm in Dubai, famed for its Dolphin Encounter. See these playful creatures up-close in waist-deep waters, from £130. The dolphins face some competition from new additions the South African Fur Seals (enjoy a cuddle, kiss and souvenir photo from £70), or from the chance to wade into the waist-high waters of Shark Lagoon to hand-feed cownose rays (£30).

Sister property Atlantis Paradise Island also has its own Dolphin Cay, with deep water swims or trainer-for-a-day experiences on offer, while Antigua boasts the famous Stingray City. Do Something Different combines an island safari with the opportunity to feed and pet stingrays, then go snorkelling with tropical fish (£74).

Australia is teeming with all manner of wildlife, from the powerful predators at Crocosaurs Cove in Darwin (entry about £17, with feeding or a terrifying crocodile swim at a supplement), to the adorable fairy penguins on Phillip Island. The latter is home to seals, koalas and kangaroos too, with £84 covering hotel pick-up, a visit to the Bass River Winery and entrance to the Penguin Parade with afternoon tea, from Do Something Different.

When it comes to Australian animals, it doesn’t get much more iconic than Queensland’s Australia Zoo, where visitors can cuddle a koala, hand-feed Asian elephants, walk beside a Sumatran tiger, or watch crocodiles lazing by the water’s edge. Travel 2 product manager Karin Rummer also suggests seeing polar bears, sea lions and sharks at Sea World on the Gold Coast. **TW**